

between text and audience. And thus while probably attempting a 'stronger' and thus more tenuous claim he is likely to be more correctly seen as constructing an argument about relations of consumption and not relations of production at all and hence to be reading forward from text to audience (interestingly one of the relations submerged in Murdock and Golding's analysis) rather than back from text to production relations, as full quotation of the relevant passage reveals: 'One might add, too, that every literary text in some sense internalises its social relations of production — that every text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced. Every text obliquely posits a putative reader, defining its productability in terms of a certain capacity for consumption' (Eagleton, 1976, p. 48).

3. Brewster (1973) attempts this by establishing rules of pertinence in accordance with motivations generated within the textual system itself (though insofar as the 'implicit reader' which this is supposed to predicate is never empirically found not altogether without contradiction). Henderson (1973/74) rightly criticises Brewster for his attempt to impose Metzian terms within a foreign problematic, but in re-stating *Cahiers'* own rules of pertinence he hardly resolves the issue which Brewster was at least attempting to face: 'The *Cahiers* reading goes beyond the text relating what is present to what is absent, thereby defining its own principles of pertinence' (Henderson, 1973/74, p. 43). The rules of pertinence then may be the properties of the studying discourse (*Cahiers'* reading) rather than of the text itself (*Young Mr Lincoln*), but then that hardly exempts that discourse from the demands of validity and coherence.

## 6

## RETHINKING STEREOTYPES

T.E. Perkins

MC 110 wk 9

Two major interests inform this paper.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, as Richard Dyer has argued, it is politically important to understand 'just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them' (Dyer, 1977a). This paper attempts to indicate where we should look for answers to these problems, and to propose some tentative hypotheses about stereotypes which might provide ideas for future research and may have some relevance for political action. It should be regarded strictly as a working paper many of whose ideas are insufficiently worked out.

The second interest which informs the paper is the theory of ideology and the concept of values as used in sociological theory. While I believe that a Marxist approach provides the most convincing and full account of ideology, I nevertheless find myself confused by current attempts to theorise ideology. Not the least of my problems arises from the unwillingness of theorists to give some empirical content to their theories. Consequently the usefulness of these theories in the analysis of actual ideological processes or in understanding a phenomenon like stereotypes is as yet hard to assess. At least part of my interest derives from this: stereotypes seem to be ideological phenomena and should therefore be capable of being accounted for by any theory of ideology; conversely as ideological phenomena of a peculiarly 'public' and easily identifiable kind they may provide a useful means of studying the practice of ideology. However, such an undertaking requires a broader perspective on stereotypes than that typically provided by psychological studies of particular groups. We need a perspective that can account for their findings, but also one which allows us at least to test hypotheses about stereotypes as ideological concepts. At the moment the generally accepted definitions of, and assumptions about, stereotypes may actually prevent one from making many theoretical statements about how stereotypes work ideologically. To say this is, of course, to draw attention to some explicit theoretical presuppositions about ideology on which my discussion of stereotypes is based. Let me outline these briefly, in terms of broad problem areas.

Ideology must be understood as being both a 'worked out' system of ideas and as being inconsistent, incoherent and unsystematic. The two



levels are not totally separate or independent of each other — on the contrary, 'Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of "common sense" . . . Common sense . . . is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas . . .' (Gramsci, 1971 p. 326, n. 5). The linkages implied here are not clearly worked out, and part of our task must now be to clarify them. We cannot understand ideology as operating merely in one of these modes, at one level only. It is the coexistence of both levels and their articulation with each other as well as with other practices that is crucial to any theorisation of how ideology functions, or of how any particular component functions. Although these problems are not explicitly broached in this paper, it will I think be clear that they inform many of the ideas put forward about stereotypes. Potentially stereotypes provide a means of studying a cross-section of ideology rather than a single stratum.

Secondly, any theory which purports to explain ideology must be able to explain the emergence of counter-ideologies and related phenomena (for example, temporary declines in 'legitimacy' of a ruling ideology). How can we explain protest of groups such as of women and gays, if the only way they can understand the world is through ideology? The problem is surely that while we must recognise (and theorise) the extent to which ideology does determine thought (and activity), we must allow that this determination is not, and can not be, total. It may be that we must posit the capacity for 'creative', non-ideologically-determined thought (I call it 'creative' for want of a better word), as a human capacity, rather than merely as an ideological effect which is therefore by implication false. The understandable reluctance to posit any quality as a 'human' capacity/potential, for fear of seeming to posit an essential of human nature (a mistaken fear in my view) seems to have led even anti-historicists such as Althusser to an ultimately historicist position where an unacknowledged invisible force is the only possible source of change and protest. The explanation of counter-ideologies is made even more difficult by a conception of ideology in general as unilaterally and uniformly imposed on identical, and identically situated, individuals. To explain protest we must admit the possibility of evaluating ideology, or an element of an ideology. Since not everyone protests at the same time, we must also account for this differential evaluation. It is after all unlikely that a structural change that is sufficient to generate a counter-ideology will not also be generally significant and 'visible'. We have to explain why only particular groups are moved to protest (gays for example), and we cannot do that with a uniform, unilateral model of ideological imposition. The only

explanation which I find convincing is one which presupposes a capacity of individuals, as members of a group, to evaluate an 'ideology' as misrepresenting 'reality', as being illegitimate. That this process will be influenced by the ruling ideology is admitted. But to be influenced by something is not to be totally determined and 'caused' by it.

Behind Gramsci's notion of hegemony lies a recognition that the effectiveness of ideology cannot be relied on, but is constantly vulnerable, constantly a source of, and a 'site' of conflict. The definition of ideology cannot, in this view, presuppose that it is unilaterally and unproblematically effective. An additional point I would wish to emphasise is that the problem is not merely to bring the recalcitrant back into line. It is the ideology itself which has to be constantly recreated and redefined. While the broad outlines of the ruling ideology are firm and *relatively* stable, the solutions to specific problems are not pre-given, they do not emerge 'logically' or automatically. They are negotiated within a framework. And this negotiation is itself a source of ideology's effectiveness, of particular contradictions and the location of future problems.

Thirdly, it will be evident in the discussion that follows that notions of truth and falsity, reality and appearance, must lie behind any discussion of stereotypes. One feature of ideology which I think remarkable is its capacity to make what is false become true. It can do this only because it is structurally reinforced. Or to put it the other way round, the structural determinants of ideology, the relations to which ideology refers, the activities which are the source of ideas and modes of thinking, are dominant. Women and blacks may be legislatively defined as equal, but the major determinant of their ideological position remains their structural position — their conditions of existence. When I say that ideology makes what is false become true I may overstate the case. But in dealing with stereotypes one has to come to terms with actual (concrete) differences between social groups. These differences, (which stereotypes often identify) are in a very important sense 'real' and therefore 'valid'. They are a mark of ideology's effectivity. This is not the whole story — the 'real' differences are also 'false', partly because of the constitution of the categories men/women as categories with different qualities when really they cannot be so differentiated. But to say that may be to posit an individual 'true self' or 'potential' which, if left to his/her own devices, would have developed differently. If we do not posit at least an 'individual potential' it is difficult to see on what grounds we can make any claims about truth and falsity in connection with stereotypes, let alone argue that they are repressive:



what do they repress?

Let me conclude this section with three comments on the relevance of the preceding remarks to my work on stereotypes. Firstly, to have said that it is 'politically' important to understand how stereotypes work implies the possibility of conscious and effective political activity. Secondly, to insist on the complexity and problematic nature of ideology is to presuppose that ideology is never totally effective and indeed cannot be. If protest movements can (sometimes) 'open up' contradictions then an understanding of stereotypes is crucial, since stereotypes are so often a focal point of activity. Thirdly, if we are to understand how stereotypes function ideologically, we must understand the articulation of both systematic and commonsense levels with relations of production. We cannot do this by looking merely at stereotypes of women or gays in advertisements, books, films or plays, because that will not tell us why and how much stereotypes are effective. We must analyse the other locations of stereotypes as well, and discover how they are constituted.

I should like first to focus on what seem to me to be dominant and often misleading assumptions about the nature of stereotypes, and which, as I said earlier, often prevent us from making theoretical statements about how stereotypes function ideologically.

According to these assumptions stereotypes are: (1) always erroneous in content; (2) pejorative concepts; (3) about groups with whom we have little/no social contact; by implication therefore, are not held about one's own group; (4) about minority groups (or about oppressed groups); (5) simple; (6) rigid and do not change; (7) not structurally reinforced. It is also assumed that (8) the existence of contradictory stereotypes is evidence that they are erroneous, but of nothing else; (9) people either 'hold' stereotypes of a group (believe them to be true) or do not; (10) because someone holds a stereotype of a group, his/her behaviour towards a member of that group can be predicted.

Although there is no discussion here of the last assumption, it is included because it refers to an area of considerable importance and complexity which has had to remain outside the scope of this paper. The ways in which we 'use' stereotypes of our own group to control relationships, and even to manipulate our oppressors, is one example of the importance of 'behaviour' and stereotypes.

The concept of 'stereotype' was first introduced into the social sciences by Lippmann in 1922 (see Harding, 1968), and his version

remains the most widely accepted by social scientists and laymen alike. It includes most of the above assumptions. If a concept is referred to as a stereotype, then the implication is that it is simple rather than complex or differentiated; erroneous rather than accurate; secondhand, rather than from direct experience; and resistant to modification by new experience (Harding, 1968). I wish to argue that while stereotypes do take this form on occasion, it is only the first of these characteristics that can be considered a part of the definition of 'stereotype', and even here I have reservations.

In so far as all typifications are simplifications since they select common features and exclude differences, then all typifications are undifferentiated (and in that sense they are also erroneous). Is it then simply a matter of degree? Should we conceptualise stereotypes as being at one end of a continuum, such that they select fewer characteristics (thereby excluding more)? This seems to be the case if we think of such stereotypes as 'dumb blonde' or 'happy-go-lucky negro'. Furthermore, this is the criterion used in empirical research to decide whether or not a stereotype exists. However, this 'simplicity' is in two senses deceptive: firstly, it may in *some* cases be better described as abstractness. That is to say that some stereotypes operate on a higher level of generalisation than other typifications; to refer 'correctly' to someone as a 'dumb blonde', and to understand what is meant by that implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to *her* sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure (in this way stereotypes are like symbols). So it is misleading to say stereotypes are simple *rather than* complex. They are simple and complex. Secondly, the description of stereotypes as simple rather than *differentiated* is similarly deceptive. The fact that there is a higher consensus (uniformity) about the adjectives which describe the characteristics of some groups, than there is about those which describe other groups, may tell us a lot about the social situation of the group being described, and does not necessarily imply prejudice or distortion. It may be the case that members of this group can 'legitimately' be characterised by three or four attributes. We cannot assume that there is an ideal number of adjectives by which to describe a group.

This is not to say that simplicity, complexity and differentiation are entirely irrelevant to the definition of stereotypes, but that they can be, and have been, misleading. Nevertheless these terms do identify the area in which we must look for differences between stereotypes and



other typifications. For example it seems that differentiation of stereotypes is often accommodated by alternative stereotypes – 'dumb blonde'/'cunning minx' – rather than by an expansion of the stereotype. I will return to these questions later.

The implication that stereotypes are 'erroneous rather than accurate' is widely accepted as part of the definition of stereotypes; inaccuracy in this context implying a false account of objective reality – blondes are not dumb, negroes are not happy-go-lucky. There are two main objections to this. Firstly, a lot of empirical research into, for example racial stereotypes, has led some theorists to oppose 'inaccuracy' with a 'kernel of truth' hypothesis. Secondly, if we claim that stereotypes are erroneous, then their potential ideological role is considerably reduced. If there were really no positive correlation between the content (perceived attributes) of a stereotype and the characteristics (actual attributes) of the group concerned, it would be tantamount to arguing *either* that the social (that is, commonly accepted) definitions of you have no effect on you, in which case it would be very difficult to see how ideology or socialisation works at all; or, that stereotypes do not represent social definitions and are sociologically insignificant since they are manifestations of pathological behaviour and thus mainly the concern of psychologists; or that they affect only your behaviour but not your 'true self', thus implying a divorce between behaviour and self. This argument is, as I have already suggested, relevant, although not in this form. The question of accuracy appears to be the central problem in the discussion of stereotypes, and I will return to it towards the end of the paper. At the moment I will mention in passing the possibility that stereotypes very often have the same structure as ideology in so far as they are both true and false. To presuppose that the content of stereotypes is always inaccurate, in the sense normally used, will prevent us from understanding stereotypes as ideological concepts.

The claim that stereotypes are 'secondhand rather than from direct experience' is similar to Klapp's distinction between stereotypes (as referring to things outside one's social world) and social types (referring to things with which one is familiar). Intuitively this seems valid. However, the consequences of accepting this distinction are unacceptable. This would rule out stereotypes of men and women, at the very least, since we all have direct experience of the opposite sex. Also it rules out stereotypes of one's own group, and hence the argument that stereotypes about one's group influence one's definition of oneself, and conversely, it ignores the influence of stereotypes on people's behaviour

towards members of other groups. For example a teacher's stereotype of working-class children may affect the teacher's expectations of the child (and thus the child itself). So the potential role of stereotypes in socialisation, and thus in ideology, is once again reduced to a very secondary one. Secondhandness is anyway characteristic of the vast majority of our concepts and cannot therefore be used to distinguish between stereotypes and other concepts.

Is it then 'resistance to modification by new experience' that is the key factor? The assumption here is that, normally, contact with the group in question would change the concept to bring it into line with reality, but that new experience will not modify a stereotype. Disregarding the fact that the assumption of inaccuracy is built into the notion of resistance, the main implication is that in contrast to other concepts, stereotypes are especially resistant (or rigid). This receives support from research into 'erroneous' and highly pejorative stereotypes which serve important psychological functions (for those holding the stereotypes) and which cannot be given up without traumatic consequences. But such stereotypes are a special case. Most concepts are resistant in the sense that they require more than one deviant case to change the concept. In order to assess whether stereotypes are particularly rigid, we need to study the conditions under which concepts change, how much information is necessary, how important the continued existence of confirmatory information is, and how important the stereotype's conceptual status is (how much else would have to change). This must surely be essential to our understanding of ideology. We cannot simply assert that stereotypes are rigid. We must look at the social relationships to which they refer, and at their conceptual status, and ask under what conditions are stereotypes more or less resistant to modification. This is not to deny that stereotypes are very 'strong' concepts, and this may be a distinguishing feature. The strength of a stereotype results from a combination of three factors: its 'simplicity'; its immediate recognisability (which makes its communicative role very important), and its implicit reference to an assumed consensus about some attribute or complex social relationships. Stereotypes are in this respect prototypes of 'shared cultural meanings'. They are nothing if not social. It is because of these characteristics that they are so useful in socialisation – which in turn adds to their relative strength.

In trying to broaden the definition of stereotype to make it applicable to the analysis of ideology, there is a risk that it will simply become indistinguishable from 'role'. According to sociological tradition, a role



is a 'set of expectations and obligations to act in certain ways in certain settings'. The child, in being taught the behaviour appropriate to his/her (or others') status (role expectations) is also taught something more, a more general lesson: that is, that group membership is important and extremely significant; in a sense it 'determines' behaviour — different groups behave differently and have different characteristics, different rights and duties and consequently groups are related to each other in different, structured, ways — some deserve more respect than others and so on. (Schools may now be particularly important in reinforcing and elaborating on this learning of group identity and significance. Universal, compulsory education may have played an important part in diminishing the influence of the trend to personalised socialisation in the family).

To learn how to behave, then, involves learning to recognise (and then evaluate) people as members of groups — that is to apply group concepts to social as well as to physical phenomena. The definition of oneself, and others, as a member of a group is absolutely essential to the ideological effectiveness of stereotypes. To learn about groups is to learn about status. Roles describe the dynamic aspect of status.

What then is the relationship between role, status and stereotype? *Status* refers to a position in society which entails a certain set of rights and duties. *Role* refers to the performance of those rights and duties, it is relational. *Stereotype* refers to both role and status at the same time, and the reference is perhaps always predominantly evaluative. (Adjectives are most important, and are often combined with or reduced to value-laden nouns — dumb blonde, bum, nigger. But stereotypes are not always so succinct.) Stereotypes do not necessarily exist about all statuses. There is not a stereotype of a typist or a cardboard-box maker. There may be an 'image' of the sort of person that is likely to be a typist, but it is very much more fluid, generalised and descriptive than a stereotype is and may be entirely personal. I should acknowledge here that I am still not sure about how to identify the boundaries of stereotypes. I will make two points to clarify the matter. Firstly, it may be that there is not a 'national' stereotype of a typist, but that there is a localised one — that is to say that those who come into close or frequent contact with a group of typists do hold a stereotype of typists. It is possible that to this extent all statuses do give rise to local stereotypes. I should add to this that of course there are at least two stereotypes which include typists — namely the stereotype of women in general, which, combined with a class stereotype, defines the parameters of a general definition of a typist. But this is of a different order to, say, the

prostitute or 'career woman' stereotype. Secondly, the boundaries of stereotypes are ultimately, I think, indefinable. What one can say, however, is that some stereotypes are much more 'highly defined' than others. The degree of definition reflects the degree of consensus that a stereotype exists, which does not mean to say that the stereotype is 'accurate'. I can illustrate this best by an example — I was discussing with a few people the 'mother's boy' stereotype, and we all agreed about its content. I then asked about 'father's girl'; this produced three different interpretations — all of which were semi-convincing, but none of which seemed definitive. Similarly with 'happy-go-lucky negro' as against 'teacher'. I would say then that the first one in each pair is a much more highly defined stereotype, and that the latter is relatively weak. But in both cases, the latter still constitutes a stereotype in a way that cardboard-box maker does not. We can introduce an arbitrary cut-off point — 50 per cent agreement and more is a stereotype; and indeed to do so is valid. But that fails to include the evaluative dimension which seems to distinguish stereotypes most clearly from roles.

Roles and statuses are also of course, intrinsically evaluative concepts. But the nature of, and the presentness of, the evaluation is different. A stereotype brings to the surface and makes explicit and central what is concealed in the concept of status or role. With a status or role we are commonly enjoined (by sociology textbooks) to look beneath them to discover the norms and values they supposedly 'rest on'; with a stereotype we must look beneath the evaluation to see the complex social relationships that are being referred to. This does not mean that stereotypes are simple *reflections* of social values; to suggest so would be to oversimplify the case. Stereotypes are selections and arrangements of particular values and their relevance to specific roles.

Because stereotypes tend to be evaluative descriptions rather than 'factual' ones, much of the learning of stereotypes can take place independently, that is to say, without specific reference to the group concerned. Children learn the meanings of such concepts as 'dumb', 'happy-go-lucky', 'uppity', 'dirty', 'lazy' and so on, regardless of whether or not they know that they attach to the nouns 'blonde', 'negro' or 'wog'; these adjectives all have specific, and often very subtle, evaluations attached to them, evaluations which form part of a socially defined structure of evaluation. 'Happy-go-lucky' means more than a 'cheerful', since it has negative as well as positive overtones, and implies a specific sort of 'irresponsibility' which has a particular significance in our society. Similarly 'uppity' means something significantly different from 'self-respect' or 'sticking up for your rights'. To know



how to use these adjectives correctly implies understanding of the different criteria that must be applied in evaluating (similar) behaviour. If the adjective is then used to describe a group rather than (as previously in the child's experience) an individual or an isolated action, the group's status is automatically defined. If the child learns the stereotype (for example, the term 'dirty wog') early in life then his/her subsequent learning of the full range of meanings of the adjective will (automatically) change the meaning of the stereotype for the child, and it will gradually lose its 'innocence' and become integrated into a complex system of evaluations that the child is learning. The superficially simple form of stereotypes combined with the specific evaluations makes their acquisition easy, and makes them particularly powerful means of conveying ideological information.

There is such a strong – if understandable – tendency to define stereotypes as pejorative that pejorativeness has become almost built into the meaning of the word 'stereotype'. 'Pejorative' implies a point of view, and there is a danger that if we build into the word 'stereotype' the assumption that they are pejorative concepts, we will unthinkingly be involved in adopting the point of view from which certain characteristics are seen to be 'bad', rather than asking (when appropriate) *why* are these characteristics 'bad.' (This happened of course in the early days of the women's movement.) I would argue anyway that there are stereotypes of all structurally central groups – class, race, gender, age. There is a male (he-man) stereotype, a WASP stereotype, a heterosexual stereotype, an upper class (leader) stereotype. These stereotypes are important because other stereotypes are partially defined in terms of, or in opposition to, them. The happy-go-lucky negro attains at least some of its meaning and force from its opposition to the 'puritan' characteristics (sombre and responsible) of the WASP. Positive stereotypes are an important part of the ideology and are important in the socialisation of both dominant and oppressed groups. In order to focus attention on the ideological nature of stereotypes it might be much more useful to talk of pejorative stereotypes and laudatory stereotypes, rather than to conceal the 'pejorativeness' in the meaning of the term.

It should now be clear that it is necessary to find a definition of stereotypes which neither includes nor excludes the assumptions just discussed – erroneous, rigidity and so on. What is evident is that the various disputes have in fact identified the various forms taken by stereotypes. Lippmann's four characteristics describe one form of stereo-

type. What I want to suggest is that the nature and form of stereotypes vary, that this variation may not be arbitrary but may be related to the ideological or aesthetic functions of the stereotypes and/or to the structural position of the stereotyped group. We need to define 'stereotype' in a sufficiently open way so as to allow for the various forms it takes and yet try to isolate its distinctive characteristics. I would suggest that the following characteristics are essential parts of stereotypes:

A stereotype is:

- (a) *A group concept*: It describes a group. Personality traits (broadly defined) predominate.
- (b) *It is held by a group*: There is a very considerable uniformity about its content. Cannot have a 'private' stereotype.
- (c) *Reflects an 'inferior judgemental process'*: (But not therefore leading necessarily to an inaccurate conclusion.) Stereotypes short-circuit or block capacity for objective and analytic judgements in favour of well-worn catch-all reactions (Fishman, 1956). To some extent all concepts do this – stereotypes do it to a much greater extent.
- (d) (b) and (c) give rise to *simple structure* (mentioned earlier) which frequently conceals complexity (see (e)).
- (e) High probability that social stereotypes will be *predominantly evaluative*.
- (f) *A concept* – and like other concepts it is a selective, cognitive organising system, and a feature of human thought (Vinacke, 1957).

Two other points need to be made about stereotypes. Firstly, stereotypes can be 'held' in two ways. They can be 'held' in the sense that they are 'believed in'. And they can be 'held' in the sense that we know that a stereotype exists about a particular group and what its content is, even though we don't necessarily believe it. However, the division between these two is not always clear. It is not merely a question of either believing or not believing, but also of the strength and consistency of the belief. The nature of stereotypes is such that most people do hold them in the sense of knowing about them, just as they know the basic tenets of Christian belief; that is they are widely *distributed*. This wide distribution makes them readily available for use in interpreting the world, if the occasion demands, just as God may be invoked by semi-believers/semi-agnostics. The political (and ideological) import-



ance of the wide distribution of stereotypes is that they can be, and are, appealed to at certain times. The current racist revival relies on people's knowledge of stereotypes, in the same way as a religious revival appeals to people's background of Christian knowledge with its explanatory potential and emotional content.

Secondly, stereotypes have what I refer to as a 'flexible range'. Essentially the same stereotype ('irrational woman') can be presented very starkly and blatantly or relatively complexly and 'realistically'. Cartoonists or comedians often appeal to the most stark (and exaggerated) version of a stereotype. Aesthetic disputes about whether or not a certain character in a film is a 'stereotype' may concern a relatively complex and 'realistic' version of a stereotype. This flexibility is undoubtedly important in maintaining credibility and communicability.

The form taken by stereotypes varies and some of this variation can be explained in terms of the group's structural position. Not all stereotypes perform identical ideological functions, nor are they related to 'objective reality' in the same way. Indeed they could not be. As will be seen later, stereotypes develop in various situations and cope with different sorts of problems. All I can do here is to outline one way of categorising stereotypes, and suggest reasons for, and consequences of, a couple of variations.

There are stereotypes about:

1. *Major Structural Groups*: colour (black/white); gender (male/female); class (upper/middle/working); age (child/young/adult/old). (Can make jokes about MS groups to mass audience.) *Everybody* is a member of *each* group.
2. *Structurally Significant and Salient Groups*: ethnic groups (Jews/Scots); artists and scientists; mothers-in-law; adolescents in the 1950s. (Comedians' topical jokes mainly from this group.)
3. *Isolated Groups*: social and/or geographic isolation. Gays; American Indians; students in the past; gypsies. (Can't make jokes about this group to mass audience unless it also belongs to another category — probably to *pariah*.)
4. *Pariah Groups*: gays; blacks; Communists in USA?; junkies? (Can make jokes to mass audience — but *may* be 'bad taste' to do so.) Groups here will also belong to another group (1-3).
5. *Opponent Groups*: upper-class twit; male chauvinist pig; reds; fascists. (Can *sometimes* make jokes to mass audience.) These contrast to others in so far as they are often developed by protesting,

deviant or oppressed groups, about their opponents. They can be subdivided into: *counter stereotypes* — e.g. male chauvinist pig — which form part of a counter-ideology and are sufficiently developed to be about a particular group (status and role); and *blanket stereotypes* — which refer to all non-believers — all non-Marxists are fascists; all non-fascists are reds. *Counters* originate from a critical attempt at reinterpretation or re-evaluation (pejorative rather than laudatory) of a dominant group. *Blankets* reinforce group solidarity by claiming a monopoly on knowledge of the 'truth' and grouping all rival claims to 'truth' as equally irrelevant and invalid.

6. *Socially/Ideologically Insignificant Groups*: milkmen; redheads.

Stereotypes of major structural groups tend to be thoroughly integrated into a number of practices. They are structurally supported — for example by laws, traditions, institutions, and so on. They are consequently relatively stable and definitively central in socialisation. They are also widely and consistently believed in and are highly effective in providing people with explanations and definitions of themselves and of others. A consequence of these characteristics is that they are most likely to be 'valid'. That is to say that we are most likely to find these attributes described by the stereotype in members of these groups (aggressive men, submissive women). Stereotypes of pariah groups are also strongly reinforced structurally and widely distributed. However, belief in them is inconsistent, but very subject to manipulation at particular times. They are, by definition, highly pejorative. Their effectiveness may be considerable, but precisely because of their almost totally negative character and lack of subtlety they are more likely to be counter-productive and at times to produce completely opposite tendencies (for example the 'puritanism' of the Black Muslims). It is important to emphasise that it would be impossible for all stereotypes of oppressed groups in our society to take this particular form. It works only because it applies to relatively few groups. The psychological and social consequences of such pariah stereotypes if applied to all oppressed groups would imply a population completely untypical of (and indeed unsuited to) Western capitalism — let alone liberal democracy. The total exclusion from society implied by pariah stereotypes is inappropriate to a working class or female stereotype.

### Stereotypes — About Which Groups?

As I said earlier stereotypes refer to statuses, but not all statuses give rise to a stereotype. A stereotype will probably develop about a group



because it has, or is presenting, a problem (for example, changing status, difficult but central relationships, and so on). Consequently most stereotypes do concern oppressed groups (because a dominant group's position is relatively stable and unproblematic).

First, a group which is presenting a problem also has a problem. If its changing structural position is presenting other groups with problems of redefinition or re-evaluation then the group itself faces these problems (of self definition and self evaluation). Stereotypes help everyone define the group.

Secondly, it may be the group itself which initially defines the situation as problematic, for example by protesting. Whether or not this is the result of structural change is an empirical question, but one of great importance to discussions about ideology. As we know, stereotypes will be a focal point of protest about a group's position.

These two points imply the following hypotheses:

- A. (i) If a group's structural position or saliency changes, a stereotype will develop about that group.
- (ii) This is most likely to happen if the change is relatively quick and/or significant.
- B. If a group protests about its position and the challenge is sufficiently threatening to the ideology a stereotype will develop about the group. (Bra-burning women's libbers.)

In addition to these I would add:

- C. If, in the above cases, a stereotype already exists then an alternative stereotype will develop. In some cases this alternative stereotype may eventually take over; in other cases it may remain as an alternative (additional) stereotype.

Examples:

- of structural change, A + C: housewife — career woman.
- of protest change, B + C: happy-go-lucky negro — uppity negro.

Gays do not yet seem to have presented a challenge which is sufficiently threatening to generate an alternative stereotype. It is of course particularly difficult for gays to do this since they have no 'legitimate' role in society.

Empirical support for these hypotheses could come from stereotypes in Group 2, or from research into changes of stereotypes. For example,

have stereotypes of the working class and women become more numerous? Have student stereotypes changed over the last forty years? Alternative stereotypes also develop for groups whose socialisation poses particular problems. The socialisation of all oppressed groups is problematic but there are differences in detail. These differences seem to account for some of the variation in number and strength of oppressed stereotypes.

### Who Defines Stereotypes, and How is Definition Reached?

This immensely complex question has to be asked even if the answer is beyond our grasp. To ask the question is to attempt to get away from the mechanistic, pre-determined and unproblematic notion of ideology I mentioned at the beginning of this paper — it is *not* to imply a conspiracy theory. The re-definition of stereotypes caused by the 'problems' mentioned occurs at various levels and is determined by a number of factors, including old stereotypes, new conditions of existence, the nature of the group's protest, and so on. One of the ways in which the mass media operate to support the ruling ideology is in this re-defining process and in the circulation of new definitions or a range of new definitions. I am not suggesting that this is calculated. The media respond to what they think the audience want, which includes 'new' or topical series as well as old favourites. The circulation of new definitions is important both to the group concerned and to other members of society. Group members or potential members (depending on the nature of the group) are offered the new definitions and interpretations. They can potentially influence (but not totally determine) its content, and they may in turn be influenced by the media. ('This is what sympathy with blacks/women/gays/adolescents/students/strikers involves'). Re-definition through the mass media takes place in all types of programme. Some series, (*Rock Follies*, *Bring on the Girls*, *Miss Jones and Son*, to name a few), may be seen as part of a process of redefining (female) stereotypes (as are 'topical' characters in old series). *Miss Jones and Son* reflects a change in saliency namely the social stigma attached to unmarried mothers has declined: we now have 'single parents', but this is still ultimately an unacceptable arrangement. The media are rethinking (re-negotiating?) the unmarried mother stereotype. This is not to use 'stereotype' in the way, for example, critics of the media do — as a negative evaluation of, say, a fictional character. Such a usage anyway implies an already existing stereotype. I am talking about social stereotypes in general, and the way in which the 'shared cultural meanings' are constituted by the media, among others.



**Stereotypes and Socialisation 'Problems'**

Stereotypes form an important part of the socialisation of major structural groups. Stereotypes of these groups are legitimations of their positions. But there are significant differences. For example, there are relatively few stereotypes about men — and a vast number about women. There are strong 'negro' stereotypes, but not very many. Why? It may be helpful first to think of the following categorisation:

Class	Visibility	
	+ve	-ve
+ve	Blacks (colour)	Working class (class)
-ve	Women (Gender)	Gay (Gender/Sexuality?)

In functionalist sociology, socialisation is conceived as essentially unproblematic, although it may at times be 'unsuccessful'. This conception is I think invalid, but is frequently found in Marxism as well. The conception of ideology as unilaterally imposed on identically situated individuals presents similar problems.

In opposition to this, I would argue that the socialisation of any oppressed group is essentially problematic in so far as contradictory value orientations must be learnt. On the one hand they must (like all members of society) adopt a value structure which defines particular attributes as more valuable than others. Those attributes, they learn, characterise the dominant group. In so far as socialisation is to a large extent concerned with learning to aspire towards social values and to recognise the desirability of those values, there is a contradiction in the socialisation of groups who 'may' not, in fact, aspire to those values. Girls, blacks and to a lesser extent, the working class, must also be taught that they themselves 'do not have' these desirable attributes and that they *'should not' aspire* to them. They must aim for values which have a relatively low status. The fact that it is acceptable for girls to be 'tomboys' but not for boys to be 'sissy' reflects the fact that girls *have* to adopt a double standard, and that boys *must not*. This contradiction is of course aggravated by an 'egalitarian' ideology.

The situation of American blacks is illustrative of the essentially problematic, because contradictory, nature of socialisation. On the one

hand they must adopt the 'American Creed', the sex roles of white society (dominant, employed, responsible, male/submissive, unemployed, home-making, female) and the materialistic values of capitalist society. The centrality (sanctity) of the family is crucial — notwithstanding the divorce rate. However the structure of the negro family<sup>2</sup> has been subjected to completely different influences from the white family. Slavery prevented (in some cases forbade) the development of a nuclear, patriarchal family and rather encouraged the development of a matriarchal family; females were breeding machines, and males had no conjugal rights and could be separated from their children and 'wife' at the owner's will. This matriarchal pattern was continued when negroes migrated to the cities where men were generally less able to find employment than women who were able to work as domestics. The negro woman in the city, therefore, often became the breadwinner. The man was characteristically unemployed. His consciousness was sufficiently determined by the values of dominant white society to recognise that the man 'ought' to be the breadwinner and consequently to feel that he didn't 'deserve' to adopt the traditional American father's role in the family. The 'irresponsibility' which is part of the 'happy-go-lucky' stereotype derives its contemporary meaning from this situation. To be unemployed is of course always presented, ideologically, as a result of individual 'laziness' and so on, rather than in terms of the system. (This is true for male unemployed whites as well, just as — interestingly enough — the *necessity* of female employment is concealed). The negro stereotype is then closely related to the negro's structural position and is constantly reinforced by that situation. But it is not a straightforward 'reflection' of that position, but rather an interpretation of it. At the same time it defines for the negro the acceptable definition of himself — that is, the definition and explanation which will be accepted by others, a definition which excludes him from competition for social rewards. By contrast the 'uppity' negro defines an unacceptable attitude — it represents a 'failure' in socialisation in so far as the contradiction between the tenets of the American Creed on the one hand and the exclusion of negroes from its compass on the other has not been resolved — the Creed's claims about equality have been taken at face value. Because the socialisation of blacks is problematic they give rise to strong stereotypes. But because of their cohesiveness in the sense of visibility, socio-economic status, and probable ghetto situation, they do not give rise to very many stereotypes.

By contrast, women's socialisation is equally problematic (strong stereotypes) but much more complex because of relative lack of



cohesiveness and of their institutionalised intimacy with men — hence it gives rise to a greater number of stereotypes. In so far as socio-economic class is generally ascribed in terms of the husband's or father's position, women can be characterised as being in a transclass situation. Gays are too. (This does not mean that it is impossible to conceive of them as a class. What is recognised is the overwhelming importance in socialisation of the socially defined status.) What is particular about women's position?

They have *very strong affective and instrumental social relationships with men, their oppressors*. These relationships are, in marriage at least, increasingly supposed to be 'equal'. At the same time however, they are acknowledged to be 'inferior'. Their transclass situation makes it particularly difficult to generate a group identity of their own. In this respect they are similar to gays, but it is even more difficult for women because of their isolation and their intimate relationship to men. The 'ghetto' situation of some (more fortunate?) gays provides some potential. The visibility of women also makes it particularly difficult to resist stereotypes, since the stereotype can be, and is, applied before any interaction takes place. In this respect, of course they are like other visible groups, particularly blacks and men (and of course whites in certain situations). These particular characteristics of women are likely to make their socialisation particularly problematic, especially in a society which makes claims to being an egalitarian democracy.

The situation of gays is different in at least two important respects. Whereas women, blacks and the working class are all exposed to stereotypes of *themselves* from birth onwards, this is not the case with gays. Gays may well be exposed to the gay stereotype for a long time before they have defined themselves as gay. It is arguable that for some/many gays the stereotypes may influence their 'decision' that they are gay. It seems that there are very few, if any, stereotypes that allow women to be aggressive or men to be caring and gentle except those relating to homosexuality (aggressive, predatory lesbian, motherly queer). Interestingly there is not (I think) a submissive lesbian stereotype, although there is an aggressive, in the sense of sadistic, queer stereotype. In terms of the effectiveness of stereotypes, the non-ascribed, non-visible, non-class, late, definition of gays must be considered. The possibility of 'choice' for gays is important — not merely in whether the stereotype is effective; it should also be considered that gay stereotypes may serve to prevent some 'gays' from defining themselves as such. And in this respect the gay stereotype will be more like other non-ascribed stereotypes — for example occupational ones. One probability is that gays

will be more conscious of stereotypes as stereotypes — whether or not they accept them as accurate. (In fact, the non-visibility of gays combined with their 'illegitimacy' means that very often the only way they can communicate their gayness is by using the stereotype, for example the physical mannerisms or dress associated with the gay stereotype. That these mannerisms become so much a part of gay activity that they may be inseparable from the gay's true self, is illustrative of the sort of processes I discussed earlier. While the use/manipulation of stereotypes is more evident perhaps in the case of gays, it is by no means limited to them.)

The situation of gays is also different because there is no legitimate social role for them — unless the comic content of some gay stereotypes lends them some legitimacy. (However, lesbians do not even have this potential). Oddly enough, while the same should be true of criminals, it is a less clear case. There can at least be 'honour among thieves', but not according to stereotypes, among gays. The strong 'group solidarity' of criminal stereotypes is totally lacking from the gay one. Gays are generally portrayed as self-centred bitches — more akin to the negative 'grasser' criminal than any of the more positive criminal stereotypes.

It seems to me probable that this 'unique' illegitimacy of gays, which reflects their almost total powerlessness, will in fact make it very difficult for them to present an effective challenge to this ideology. The change in gays' situation, and stereotypes, will be most likely to come in on the coat-tails of other changes. Furthermore the other three oppressed groups discussed all have important structural (economic) links with their oppressors. Gays do not.

### **Stereotypes are Structurally Reinforced**

There is a risk that in rejecting the oversimplified mechanistic version of ideology as being determined by the infrastructure we will ignore the influence of material conditions altogether. I wish therefore to make it absolutely clear that I believe while ideology is not a mere reflection of the socio-economic structure, material conditions are important determinants of consciousness. For example, the work situation of the housewife is such that she develops the capacity to cope with several things at once and learns not to concentrate on one thing so hard that she is not aware of what else is going on and cannot switch skills instantaneously. It will not encourage the capacity for analytical (critical) thought but will call considerably on the emotional side of her personality and for quick emotional responses. Her organisational skills may be highly developed in a limited area. Similarly, the work situation of a



manual worker will encourage a decline in his/her capacity for creative or critical thought, while that of a junior executive will exercise his/her decision making capacity and necessarily develop 'human-relation' skills related to his/her position of authority (that is, leadership skills).

These are gross oversimplifications no doubt, but illustrative of the sort of determining influences material conditions have on consciousness. In each situation there are factors which counteract these tendencies, but they are weaker and tend either to be non-typical features of the work situation, or to be typical but subject to social sanctions thereby weakening their potential influence. These three examples illustrate one of the ways in which stereotypes are structurally reinforced. Part of the stereotype of women concerns their inability to concentrate on one issue at a time, their mental flightiness, scattiness and so on. In the middle of a conversation about one issue they skip to something completely different. This is all part of the 'irrational, illogical, inconsistent' (female logic) stereotype. Now what this seems to me to relate to is a mode of thinking which is essential to the housewife's job. Most other jobs demand concentration on a single issue and the application of one skill at a time; the capacity to keep shifting attention back and forth, and changing skills, is characteristic of a housewife's job. What the stereotype does is to identify this feature of the woman's job situation, place a negative evaluation on it, and then establish it as an innate female characteristic, thus inverting its status so that it becomes a cause rather than an effect. It is these features of stereotypes which explain why stereotypes appear to be false — indeed, *are* false. The point at the moment is to identify their validity, because the strength of stereotypes lies in this combination of validity and distortion.

Whether or not I am correct in identifying this capacity as one which is produced by the housewife's situation is something only research could tell us. Undoubtedly it is a difference which cartoonists recognise, as shown by all those cartoons of father sitting at the breakfast table immersed in the newspaper while all hell lets loose around him. This characterisation of women as incapable of sticking to a single topic is a good example of flexibility — gross exaggerations occur in comedy and cartoons — but a more realistic version is used in everyday life.

#### **Stereotypes: Short-Circuiting as an Ideological Feature**

It would of course be naive to argue that the work situation was totally determinant. However if we accept the view that the educational curriculum is so structured as to restrict the development of critical

ability to those going on to higher education and to conceal the 'constructed' nature of knowledge until then, then the propensity of most jobs to discourage such intellectual abilities will be greatly increased. (The greater decline in measured intelligence of manual as compared to white collar workers may reflect this. It may also explain the negative correlation between stereotypical thinking and education). The underdevelopment of analytical/critical thought at school is in itself ideologically important but does not concern us here. I simply want to point to this linkage: stereotypes short-circuit critical thinking; their effectiveness depends in part on our willingness to short-circuit. Our willingness derives from two things: firstly, it may simply make life easier, more convenient; the other is that information may be limited and our critical faculties may be underdeveloped, and effectively we may often have no other choice but to short-circuit. This is true of all of us sometimes. But the more limited our knowledge and training then the greater the area will be where short-circuiting is the only solution. This characteristic of stereotypes appears to locate them firmly in the area of 'common sense', one of whose distinguishing features, according to Gramsci, is its unworked-out character. However, though this may be their main arena, we cannot limit our analysis of stereotypes to this level. Common sense also contains 'scientific ideas' and 'philosophical currents'. So too do stereotypes and our understanding of their location in systematic worked out ideology, in legislation and so on, is essential to an understanding of how they function ideologically.

#### **Accuracy — the Central Problem?**

I have already dealt in passing with many of the issues which are related to accuracy. I have said that stereotypes are often 'valid'; that they are often effective in so far as people define themselves in terms of the stereotypes about them; that they are structurally reinforced; that they refer to role performances, and so on. However, having said all this there are important senses in which stereotypes are inaccurate or false. Here I refer to my earlier claim that stereotypes are similar to ideology in that they are both (apparently) true and (really) false at the same time. I will discuss this in the context of differences between stereotypes of dominant and oppressed groups. Two main points about their falsity are to be made: Firstly, stereotypes present interpretations of groups which conceal the 'real' cause of the group's attributes and confirm the legitimacy of the group's oppressed position. Secondly, stereotypes are selective descriptions of particularly significant or problematic areas and to that extent they are exaggerations.



Stereotypes are evaluative concepts about status and role and as such are central to interpreting and evaluating social groups, including one's own. Definition of oneself as a member of a group is essential to the socialisation process, and an important element of social control. Oppressed groups pose particular problems of control and definition. The fact that group membership is a much more salient part of the self-definition of oppressed groups than is membership of high status groups to them, reflects these problems (Holter, 1970 p. 210). This saliency is the effect of the contradiction and is a mechanism of social control. Because one's membership of a group is always present, so too is the stereotype of oneself and so too therefore, is a self-derogatory concept – to be socialised is to be self-oppressed. (Effectiveness of the ideology relies on this as does its 'legitimacy'). But to have adopted this concept will have involved adopting contradictory value orientations as well, which means that the self-definition (self-oppression) is always vulnerable and needs constant reinforcing. Furthermore, the consciousness of oneself as a member of a particular group, which is essential to social control, is also potentially threatening. The continued and persistent class-consciousness of an often apparently a-political and apathetic working class, the feminine consciousness of 'unliberated' and repressed women, are evidence of this consciousness of group membership.

Stereotypes are particularly strong, I have argued, when they have to operate as conceptual (cognitive) resolutions of such contradictions. It is this resolution that is the real location of their inaccuracy. Stereotypes were described earlier as being descriptions of an effect (consciousness) which was then evaluated and inverted, so it becomes a cause, which then explains the differentiation of which it is actually a description. This process (similar in structure to alienation) is typical of ideology. The inversion of effect into cause is the primary means of conceptually resolving the contradiction involved, for example, in the socialisation of oppressed groups. However, it can become a cause only because it makes ideological sense. The content of stereotypes is not arbitrary (nor are they interchangeable). Stereotypes are selective descriptions – they select those features which have particular ideological significance. Hence, remarkably few stereotypes refer to such qualities as kindness, compassion, integrity – or even honesty) nor their opposites). Personality traits can be subdivided into: mental, sexual and personal. However it is the mental attributes which are definitive and which seem to 'dictate' the rest of the content. Other attributes become linked to mental characteristics in a non-reciprocal

way. Dumb does not imply dirty; 'dirty' as a social description does imply 'stupidity'. The reason mental characteristics are dominant is that they are ideologically the most significant (and therefore convincing). Briefly, economic differentiation is the most important differentiation. The ideological criterion for economic differentiation in our capitalist society is primarily intelligence; and only secondly 'contribution' to the society and possession of skills which are necessary but 'supposedly' scarce (for example, decision-making, responsibility, leadership qualities). The most important and the *common* feature of the stereotypes of the major structural groups relates to their mental abilities. In each case the oppressed group is characterised as innately less intelligent. It is particularly important for our ideology that attributes should be conceived of as being innate characteristics either of human nature in general (competitiveness) or of women/men/blacks in particular, since this supports the belief that they are not the effect of the socio-economic system (and the order of things appears to be inevitable – the survival of the fittest and may the best man win). The fact that stereotypes do so often present attributes as if they were 'natural' is not a feature of stereotyping *per se*, so much as an indication that they are ideological concepts. The existence of endless research programmes into innate differences and the publicity their results receive, supports the legitimacy of stereotypes (regardless of the actual results) and of the ideological claim that social differentiation arises from innate differences. The notion that we can (do) have any control over social relationships is absent, and its absence confirms its irrelevance. This problem of course has considerable political importance to oppressed groups, and they need to question the efficacy of involving themselves in disputes about innate differences – there is no easy answer, I might add!

What then are the main differences between stereotypes of oppressed and of dominant groups? Stereotypes of oppressed groups are stronger and sometimes more numerous, and more 'present' in the consciousness (and self-definition) of the oppressed group. They will also be more present in the consciousness of the dominant group. A member of an oppressed group will, by definition, have limited access to the 'goods' of society, and the stereotype will confirm this limited access (and its legitimacy) but should not be seen as causing it.

Stereotypes of dominant groups will also confirm the boundaries of their own legitimate activity (as will the stereotypes of oppressed groups, of which dominant groups may be more conscious than their own stereotypes). It is as important for them to adopt the value struc-



ture and to confirm that the goods of society are 'good' as it is for others to continue to see them as good (if unattainable). (Good here refers to anything defined as socially desirable, not just material goods, for example going *out* to work rather than doing housework). Men who choose (prefer) to stay at home to look after the children while their wives go out to work, challenge the value structure. And a challenge from a dominant group is potentially more threatening (if much less likely) than one from a subordinate group. (The content of gay stereotypes might deserve analysis in this light.) In that respect, a male, white, upper class stereotype is *more* limiting. A challenge from a subordinate group can often be interpreted as a confirmation of the value structure. Stereotypes of oppressed groups will be pejorative, but their pejorativeness is complex and often concealed. Stereotypes of pariah groups may be unambiguously pejorative, but the pejorativeness of female stereotypes is concealed since they must resolve the specific contradictions of women's position. Hence the stereotype presents female characteristics as desirable, for women, and masculine characteristics as undesirable. So the negative female stereotypes 'cunning minx', 'bluestocking', 'career woman' (or the lesbian ones) are stereotypes that essentially acknowledge that women may be intelligent (or aggressive) but define that intelligence as, in *their* case, undesirable (and 'unnatural'). These three stereotypes also reflect another aspect of female stereotypes which is more limiting than others — that is, a great many alternative stereotypes have been generated to accommodate this particularly difficult group. The 'bluestocking' or 'career woman' stereotype accommodates women in these categories by excluding them from being sexual beings or mothers. Male stereotypes are rarely so specific. It need hardly be said that this difference reflects 'objective reality' (it is extremely difficult to be a career woman and a mother).

There is always a danger in setting oneself tasks at the beginning of a paper however modest those tasks may then seem to be. I was conscious of one particularly serious problem — namely the very few and scattered references to how stereotypes function aesthetically, but I came to the conclusion that we can not begin to answer that without first working out the more general question of how they function ideologically. I am conscious of other omissions and errors of emphasis — and I have no doubt the reader is too. What I hope I have achieved is to provide a theoretical perspective on stereotypes which allows us to investigate them as ideological phenomena, which begins to establish in some detail their ideological role and also which explains the existence

of stereotypes, their varied number, content and form, as sociologically significant rather than as random and arbitrary phenomena.

### Notes

1. This paper would not have been written had it not been for the encouragement and unfailing confidence of Richard Dyer. I am indebted to him for that. There is little in the paper that has not benefited from his insights and constructive criticisms, and any credit that is given is due equally to him; the blame I will keep for myself.

I must also acknowledge a debt to Terry Lovell, some of whose (currently) unpublished work I found very helpful in clarifying my own ideas and in suggesting new ones.

2. I use the term 'negro' here in order to distinguish between a social group with a specific historical background and the larger group of 'non-whites' which the term 'black' now often includes.